First Fairbury Area Family Arrived 190 Years Ago

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Hugh Steers was born in 1756 in Cork, Ireland. He emigrated from Ireland to the United States and then served as a soldier in the Revolutionary War. His first major battle was in 1871 against Native Americans who were friendly to the British. The Native Americans won the battle, and Hugh Steers was taken as a prisoner. Hugh was kept captive by the Native Americans until his freedom was negotiated with the Shawnee nation in 1873. After the War ended, Hugh Steers married Mary Fowler in Kentucky. They had a large family of 11 children in Boone County, Kentucky. One of their children, Rachel Steers, was born in 1793.

Valentine Martin Darnall was born in Virginia in 1797. At the age of 20, Valentine married Rachel Steers in Boone County, Kentucky, in 1818. Rachel was 25 years old when she married Valentine Darnall. They had six children in Kentucky.

In 1830, Valentine was 33 years old, and his wife Rachel was 37 years old. They decided to move their family of six children west to Illinois. They chose to move and set up a farm south of what is now Fairbury. Central Illinois was the last part of Illinois to be settled.

In October of 1830, the Darnall family started their trek from Boone County, Kentucky, to what is now Indian Grove Township. The trip took several weeks. They made the journey with an old-fashioned scooped bed wagon, which had a tremendous capacity for carrying household goods. Four horses drew their wagon, and this horse team struggled to pull the heavy wagon through the deep mud they encountered. The Darnall family arrived at their new home on October 27, 1830.

The first priority for Valentine Darnall was to build a log cabin for his family. Mr. Valentine built their first log cabin using the only tool he owned, an ax. The house was finished by November 1, 1830. The Darnall family spent their first winter in this log cabin.

The next major challenge the Darnall family faced was the terrible winter of 1830-1831. This winter came to be known as the winter of the "great snow." The food supply for the Darnall family was about to run out. Mr. Darnall decided to travel by horseback to a small settlement at Mackinaw to purchase more provisions. Shortly after Valentine Darnall arrived at Mackinaw, heavy snow began to fall with calm winds. The snow kept falling until it reached a depth of four feet. Once the snow stopped, a drizzling rain turned to sleet. Intensely cold weather moved in, and the country was covered with a sheet of ice overlaying the snow.

The weather conditions made it impossible to travel by horseback. Mr. Darnall was forced to remain at Mackinaw for five days with the knowledge that his family was suffering for food. They could not even obtain the wild game for the snow had killed all wild things and buried them under its white blanket.

Mr. Darnall finally made his perilous journey back to his cabin on horseback over the ice-crusted snow. On the front of the saddle, Mr. Darnall had the carcass of a deer, while fastened to his saddle's back were the much-needed provisions.

The last native American Indian tribe who lived in the Fairbury area were the Kickapoo. In the early 1800s, they had a settlement at Leroy, Illinois. In 1828, about 700 Kickapoo moved from Leroy to about four miles southwest of present-day Fairbury. In 1830, the 630 tribe members moved to Oliver's Grove south of Chatsworth. The Chatsworth settlement had a council house, 97 wigwams, and several small encampments.

The Kickapoo tribe members still frequented the area where the Darnall family chose to settle. Valentine Darnall tried to deal fairly and honestly with the Kickapoo he encountered. The Kickapoo gave him the name of the "good shomoki man," meaning the good white man.

During the terrible winter of 1830-1831, the Kickapoo realized the Darnall family was running low on food. They gave the Darnall family some brown beans to eat. The family could also grow more food next spring.

The story was often recited that Mrs. Darnall once asked an old Chief if he and his tribesmen would kill them if an uprising should occur. The old Chief is said to have replied, "Oh yes, but we kill them quickly," meaning that they would not be tortured.

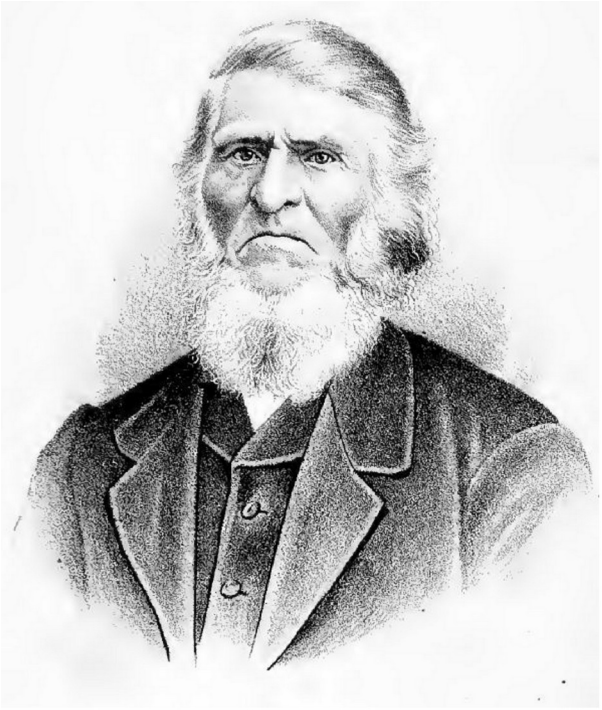
In 1832, the Black Hawk war made it necessary for Mr. Darnall to temporarily move his family to Mackinaw for safety. After peace was declared, the family returned to their log cabin and farm.

In 1930, a huge celebration was held at the W. D. Spence farm commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Valentine and Rachel Darnall's family settling south of Fairbury. One hundred forty-four direct descendants attended the festivities. Lunch was served at noon for the hundreds of direct descendants and friends. The Fairbury high school band played, and numerous speeches were given.

One of the most exciting and enjoyable features of the day was the "Style Show." Twelve young ladies and two young men, all of whom were either grandchildren or great-grandchildren of Mr. and Mrs. Darnall, got dressed in old clothing. The children then passed in review, wearing various periods of dress worn within the past 100 years. These different articles of wearing apparel had been resurrected from old trunks and attics and were genuine articles. Among them were long dresses and balloon sleeves, ruffles and flounces, skin-fitting men's trousers, high hats, etc. A group photograph of the direct

descendants was taken. The only two attendees from the Fairbury area in the 1930 photo known to be still alive include Marilyn Payne-Wells and her brother Howard Payne.

The Darnall family was the first pioneer settlers of the Fairbury area and Livingston County. Many descendants of the Darnall family still live in the Fairbury area. The original homestead is still owned by family descendants 190 years after Valentine and Rachel Steers came to Fairbury.



Valentine Martin Darnall and his wife Rachel Steers. They were the first pioneer settlers in the Fairbury area in 1830.